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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study has investigated the merit of using online Message Boards and online student expertise during practicum experiences for the past three academic years. First-year results provided data that suggested extending conversations online among practicum students was beneficial to students. In year 2, in which eight students participated, an increase was found in the mean across the semester regarding students' self-perceptions of their expertise in using online Message Boards but a slight decrease in the mean regarding students' perceptions of the merit of message boards. In year 3 (2002-2003) there were 12 participants. The researcher incorporated an additional online requirement and pretest-posttest means for both students' perceptions of the merit of using online Message Boards and their perceptions of their expertise in using online Message Boards increased. (Author/SLD)

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A LONGITUDINAL STUDY EXAMINING THE MERIT OF INTERNET MESSAGE BOARD USE AND RELATED STUDENT EXPERTISE DURING PRACTICUM EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The Investigator has studied the merit of using online Message Boards and online student expertise during practicum experiences for the past three academic years. First year results provided data that suggested extending conversations online among practicum students was beneficial to students. In year two of the study the Investigator discovered an increase in the mean across a semester regarding students' self-perceptions of their expertise in using online Message Boards but a slight decline in the mean regarding students' perceptions of the merit of online message boards. In year three (2002-2003) the Investigator incorporated an additional online requirement and pretest/posttest means for both the students' perceptions of the merit of using online Message Boards and their perceptions of their expertise in using online Message Boards increased.

Introduction

The Investigator has been studying the merit and worth of practicum students using online Message Boards during practicum experiences for three academic years (2000-2003).

The first year of examining practicum students' usage of online Message Boards provided qualitative data that seemed to indicate extending conversations among the students beyond the real-time seminars was beneficial. Students shared weekly reflections of their particular field placements with their cohorts online. Students sometimes replied to other participants' postings and dialogue beyond real-time meetings resulted. Conversations about the field experiences emerged that would otherwise not have occurred.

In addition to the practicum students being able to read fellow participants' weekly practicum reflections online, the Investigator provided opportunities for students across the Education Department to access and read the reflections. The Message Boards were made available to students across the department's programs through an online private web group created by the Investigator. Students who had not yet had practicum experiences were able to read about "life in the educational practicum trenches" through the postings of their senior counterparts. It seemed evident that the sharing of field experience reflections across the education programs sparked conversations among education students that otherwise would not have occurred.

Incorporation of Online Message Boards

Three years ago, online Message Boards were incorporated into the practicum course. After the initial weeks of on-campus seminars, students were assigned the task of posting weekly reflections on a Message Board. During each week of the field-placement a message thread was created by the Instructor in the Practicum Message Board. An e-mail listserv containing the e-mail addresses of the practicum students was constructed. Each week, after the message thread was added to the Message Board, the Instructor listserv e-mailed the students to alert them to the posting of the message thread and to instruct them on where to find the thread and when to post their weekly reflection.

When the practicum students would open the message thread they would discover additional instructions about how to copy and paste their weekly reflection, for the practicum week, as a reply in the message thread.

Weekly postings by the practicum students revealed the ups and downs of their practicum experiences. In 2001, the Investigator shared several of the Message Board postings at the Mid-Western Educational Research Association Annual Meeting in Chicago as evidence for considering the ongoing study of judging the merit of such online activities.

The Study

With the first year of data revealing considerable potential merit of such online activities, the Investigator determined that a more formal assessment should be constructed in the second year of the study to yield additional information. A qualitative/quantitative case study utilizing a pretest/posttest component was designed to provide additional data regarding the merit of practicum students using online Message Boards during their field experiences.

In the pretest, practicum students were asked to rank their expertise in using online Message Boards and to rank their perception of the merit and worth of using such online Message Boards as a process of communication while in their field experience(s).

Students were then asked to write about what they expected to learn from posting weekly online reflections during the practicum experience. They were also asked to write about what they expected to learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflections during the experience.

The study was qualitative in nature because the sample was convenient and because the intent was to present findings in a case study format. Results of the pretest/posttest case were presented at the 2002 Mid-Western Educational Research Association Meeting in Columbus, Ohio.

Year Two Study Results

PRETEST

Pretest Question 1

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank your expertise in using online Message Boards:

Mean= 7.43 Median= 9 Mode= 9 n= 8

Pretest Question 2

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication.

Mean= 8.87 Median= 9 Mode= 10 n= 8

Pretest Question 3

What do you expect to learn from posting weekly online reflections during the practicum experience? (Provide a short paragraph)

Answers that best reflected the group's answers:

"By posting online weekly reflections, I expect that I will notice more about my teaching methods and myself that I have previously overlooked. Sometimes just writing about your experiences can help you think of solutions for some of your problems."

"I expect to gain simply by reflecting. It will be a chance to look back, critique and learn from experiences. It can be valuable as something to look back on to see growth. It will give helping advice and encouragement to those who read them."

Pretest Question 4

What do you expect to learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings during the practicum experience? (Provide a short paragraph)

Answers that best reflected the group's answers:

"I can learn what other people are going through and compare it to my own experience. I will be able to take whatever things work for them and apply them and avoid whatever doesn't work for them.

Pretest Question 4 continued:

"I will learn what other students are experiencing in the classroom, as well as what problems or positives they are facing. If a student is having a similar problem that I may be, I can call on them to help me through personal experiences. Also, it enables everyone who takes part to actively help each other with support/advice."

POSTTEST

Posttest Question 1

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank your expertise in using online Message Boards:

Mean= 8 Median= 9 Mode= 9 n=8

Posttest Question 2

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication:

Mean= 8.2 Median= 9 Mode=9 n=8

Posttest Question 3

What did you learn from posting weekly online reflections during the practicum experience? (Provide a short paragraph.)

Answers that best reflected the group's answers:

"It helped me reflect on everything I went through over the week, thinking about things I did well or things I can do better. I got to see how my experiences compared with others."

"I learned a lot about myself and my teaching methods. Actually thinking about a reflection that my classmates were going to read helped me come up with better ideas and reflect on what I had been doing in class."

Posttest Question 4

What did you learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings during the practicum experience? (Provide a short paragraph.)

Answers that best reflected the group's answers:

"I learned about the highs and lows that each practicum student was experiencing. Comparing my experience with others was very interesting because I could see the different things each teacher was going through. This helps you sympathize and reflect about how you would handle situations that different teachers are in."

"I learned that everyone has good and bad days. Also, you can throw out a question to your peers and get well thought out answers and responses. I also learned that reflective teaching is a benefit because you can sort of talk back to yourself and to others and find ways to improve and also realize what you did well as well."

PRETEST/POSTTEST COMPARISONS

Question 1

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank your expertise in using online Message Boards:

Pretest:	**Mean= 7.43**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 9**	**n= 8**
Posttest:	**Mean= 8**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 9**	**n=8**

Participants' self-ranking of their expertise in using online Message Boards mean scores increased .57 from the pretest to the posttest. The median and mode remained constant.

Question 2

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication:

Pretest:	**Mean= 8.87**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 10**	**n= 8**
Posttest:	**Mean= 8.18**	**Median= 9**	**Mode=9**	**n=8**

Participants' self-ranking of the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication decreased .69 from the pretest to the posttest. The median remained constant and the mode decreased from 10 to 9.

Question 3

Pretest: What do you expect to learn from posting weekly online reflections….?

"….Notice more about my teaching methods and myself…. Opportunity to reflect and look back…"

Posttest: What did you learn from posting weekly online reflections….?

"….It helped me reflect on everything I went through…. I learned a lot about myself and my teaching methods…."

Participants' reported expectations about what they expected to learn from posting weekly online reflections complemented what they reported they learned from posting weekly online reflections.

Question 4

Pretest: What do you expect to learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings….?

"….I can learn what other people are going through and compare it to my own experience…. I will learn what other students are experiencing in the classroom, as well as what problems or positives they are facing…."

Posttest: What did you learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings….?

"….I learned about the highs and lows that each practicum student was experiencing…. I also learned that reflective teaching is a benefit…

Participants' reported expectations about what they expected to learn from reading other participants' weekly online postings complemented what they reported they learned form reading other participants' weekly online reflections.

Highlights of Year Two of the Study

Students reported a .57 mean gain in their expertise in using online Message Boards during the experience.

Students reported a .69 decrease in the mean regarding their perception of the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication.

Students' perceptions about what they expected to learn from posting weekly online reflections complemented their perceptions about what they had learned from such postings.

Students' perceptions about what they expected to learn from reading other participants' complemented their perceptions about what they had learned from such readings.

Year Two Study Reflections

The Investigator anticipated mean score increases between the pretest and posttest regarding participant self-reported expertise in using online Message Boards and an increase of .57 was realized. The Investigator did not expect a .69 decrease in pretest/posttest mean score regarding the merit and use of Message Boards. Were the participants unrealistic in their expectations? Were the high pretest scores unrealistic? Did the fact that the students who used the Message Boards least also reported the lowest posttest scores regarding their merit contribute to the decrease significantly? Additionally, the qualitative responses in pretest and posttest questions 3 and 4 were complementary and expected.

The quantitative results of a decreased mean score, regarding the merit of use of Message Boards, suggested a slight dissonance between what students expected the merit of Message Boards to be and what the merit actually was. However, the qualitative responses regarding what students expected to learn from posting and reading the postings of others were complementary across the study.

Year Three Study Results

Because there was a discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative results, regarding the merit of using online Message Boards, in the second year of the study, the Investigator collected additional data with a new participation requirement in place.

In addition to posting weekly reflections, practicum students were required to provide thoughtful online replies to at least two other participants' weekly reflections in a timely manner.

PRETEST

Pretest Question 1

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank your expertise in using online Message Boards:

Mean= 7.33 Median= 7 Mode= 7 n= 12

Pretest Question 2

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication.

Mean= 7.75 Median= 8 Mode= 8 n= 12

Pretest Question 3

What do you expect to learn from posting weekly online reflections during the practicum experience? (Provide a short paragraph)

Answers that best reflected the group's answers:

"Posting weekly online reflections gives me a chance to express thoughts or feelings that have occurred after class. Additionally, it allows me to communicate further with other students and the professor. Often times, taking an issue or thought to a higher level."

"I expect that I will learn about the teaching methods as well as problems/solutions that other students come up with. I hope to gain useful knowledge that will (be) beneficial to my teaching. I will learn how to reflect upon my own teaching and discover my strengths and weaknesses."

"I expect to learn how my experience of teaching and my opinion about teaching changes over the span of the semester."

Pretest Question 4

What do you expect to learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings during the practicum experience? (Provide a short paragraph)

Answers that best reflected the group's answers:

"By reading the variety of experiences of other students, I hope to gain a well-rounded vision for my teaching. Hopefully, my postings and replies will help others to gain the same."

"I expect to learn how others are feeling about their experiences. I hope to read their problems and provide ideas for solutions and vice-versa for me. I hope that I can communicate and learn from other postings and experiences."

"From others we can learn from their experiences and include their insights to help shed light onto our own individual experiences. Especially when there are troubles and concerns and how they came to solutions are valuable resources."

POSTTEST

Posttest Question 1

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank your expertise in using online Message Boards:

Mean= 9.16 Median= 9 Mode= 10 n= 12

Posttest Question 2

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication.

Mean= 8.75 Median= 9 Mode= 9 n= 12

PRETEST/POSTTEST COMPARISONS

Question 1

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank your expertise in using online Message Boards:

2002-2003

Pretest:	**Mean= 7.33**	**Median= 7**	**Mode= 7**	**n= 12**
Posttest:	**Mean= 9.16**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 10**	**n= 12**

2001-2002

Pretest:	**Mean= 7.43**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 9**	**n= 8**
Posttest:	**Mean= 8**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 9**	**n=8**

Question 2

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication:

2002-2003

Pretest:	**Mean= 7.33**	**Median= 7**	**Mode= 7**	**n= 12**
Posttest:	**Mean= 8.75**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 9**	**n= 12**

2001-2002

Pretest:	**Mean= 8.87**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 10**	**n= 8**
Posttest:	**Mean= 8.18**	**Median= 9**	**Mode=9**	**n=8**

Question 3

Pretest: What do you expect to learn from posting weekly online reflections….?

"I expect that I will learn about the teaching methods as well as problems/solutions that other students come up with…."

Posttest: What did you learn from posting weekly online reflections….?

"I learned that it is important to take the time & reflect on my teaching, not only daily but weekly…. Posting on a weekly basis helped me to reflect on the

happenings of the week…. I learned different ways to solve problems from the group members that I would not have thought of myself."

Participants' expectations about what they expected to learn from posting weekly online reflections complemented what they reported they learned from posting weekly online reflections.

Question 4

Pretest: What do you expect to learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings….?

"….I hope to gain a well-rounded vision for my teaching…. I expect to learn how others are feeling about their experiences…. I hope to read their problems and provide ideas for solutions and vice-versa for me…. I hope that I can communicate and learn from other postings and experiences."

Posttest: What did you learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings….?

"….From reading other people's postings I could compare my experience with theirs…. If someone needed help I would give it…. If someone had a question I did my best job to answer it…. I think it is important to do the posts because it helps you get feedback or it helps you make it through if you had a bad experience…. I know some people said they wouldn't have made it without the replies. They really help."

Participants' expectations about what they expected to learn from reading other participants' weekly online postings complemented what they reported they learned form reading other participants' weekly online reflections.

Highlights of Year Three of the Study

Students reported a 1.83 mean gain in their expertise in using online Message Boards, across the experience.

Students reported a 1.00 mean gain regarding their perception of the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication, across the experience.

Students' pretest written statements about what they expected to learn from posting weekly online reflections complemented their posttest statements regarding what they had learned from such postings.

Students' pretest written statements about what they expected to learn from reading other participants' complemented their posttest statements about what they had learned from such readings.

Year Three Study Reflections

The Investigator once again anticipated mean score increases between the pretest and posttest, in the third year of the study, regarding participant self-reported expertise in using online Message Boards and an increase in the mean from pretest to posttest of 1.83 was realized. The second year's mean gain had been .57 so a difference in mean gain from year two to year three in the study was 1.26. In the second year of the study, the Investigator had not expected a .69 decrease in pretest/posttest mean score regarding the merit and use of Message Boards. The quantitative results of a decreased mean score in year two, regarding the merit of use of Message Boards, suggested a slight dissonance between what students expected the merit of Message Boards to be and what the merit actually was. However, the qualitative responses regarding what students expected to learn from posting and reading the postings of others were complementary across the study. The Investigator noted that in year two of the study there was a correlation evident between praticum students who replied to others' postings infrequently and their posttest quantitative scores regarding the merit of using Message Boards during practicum.

Since there had been a discrepancy between pretest/posttest student-provided narratives regarding the merit of message board usage when compared with pretest/posttest quantitative data, in year two of the study, the Investigator decided to include a new requirement for year three. In a prior study the Investigator discovered the importance of training and requirements of use in any program or pursuit (Moffett, 1997). With this in mind, the Investigator required practicum students to not only post weekly

reflections in the Message Board but also to post weekly replies in the message board to at least two other participants' postings in a prescribed time window.

With the new requirement for replying to at least two other participants' weekly reflections in place, a mean gain of 1.00 for students' perceptions of the merit of message boards was realized in year three across the study compared with a .69 loss for same in year two of the study. In addition to a 1.69 mean difference regarding the merit of using Message Boards during practicums, across years two and three of the study, a 1.26 mean gain was realized from year two to year three in student reported expertise in the use of Internet Message Boards.

Year three study results suggest that if practicum students are required to reply to other practicum students' online reflections, in addition to posting their own reflections, the students will report greater perceived merit in the use of Message Boards during practicum experiences. Additionally, if students are required to post additional replies in the message boards it seems evident that their self-reported expertise in using Message Boards will also increase significantly.

Summary

Year one of the study (Moffett, 2001) garnered qualitative data that suggested merit in students sharing the ups and downs practicum experiences via online Message Boards. Year two of the study revealed gains in self-reported expertise regarding the use of online Message Boards but produced a quantitative/qualitative discrepancy regarding the merit of use of online Message Boards as a communications tool (Moffett, 2002).

When requirements of use were introduced in year three of the study, whereby students were required to reply to at least two other practicum participants' weekly postings in a

timely manner, in addition to posting their own weekly reflection, the quantitative/qualitative discrepancy realized in year two of the study was extinguished.

At the end of the third year of the study, the Investigator has many questions to reflect upon: Was the second year student-reported pretest quantitative mean regarding the merit of use of message boards exaggerated (2002 pretest mean= 8.87, 2003 pretest mean=7.33)? Did the correlation between some practicum students underutilizing the Message Boards in year two of the study, prior to the added year three requirement, and the subsequent decrease in the posttest mean (-.69) regarding the merit of such use cause the qualitative/quantitative discrepancy? How much did the new requirement, in year three of the study, of posting at least two weekly replies to other practicum participants', in addition to posting personal weekly reflections, impact the realized mean gain difference of 1.69 from year two to year three of the study, in regards to the students' perceptions of the merit of using online message boards? How significant is the dynamic of the particularities of different practicum groups on the findings and how do the differences among the convenient samples impact the self-reported quantitative/qualitative data?

The Investigator is contemplating the possibility of forming two practicum groups for further study, in response to the above questions. One group will be required to post replies to other practicum participants' weekly postings, in addition to posting their own weekly reflection, while another group will not be required to post replies to others' reflections. Perhaps the discrepancies realized in year two of the study where students were not required to reply to others' postings will reappear in the group that is not required to provide such replies.

In conclusion, more research is warranted in this endeavor to explore the variables impacting students' perceptions of the merit of using online Message Boards during practicum experiences and their self-reported perceptions of their expertise in using such message boards.

Ancillary Information: The Practicum

The practicum studied consists of 15 on-campus seminars followed by 12 weeks of placements in area schools for two hours daily. During the first three and one-half weeks of the semester, the Investigator and practicum students meet for 12 on-campus seminars from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. to contemplate such matters as classroom management, reflective practice, discipline plans, lesson plans, unit plans, etc. Students write daily reflections of the seminar experience. Beyond the initial 12 seminars, practicum students are placed in local schools. Multi-Age Art and Music students experience two six-week placements while Secondary Education students are placed in one 12 week setting.

Students write daily reflections about the placement experience(s) to add to their subsequent INTASC portfolios. College Supervisors (CS's) typically observe the practicum students twice during the practicum experience, providing a midterm and final evaluation of their performance. The Cooperating Teachers (CT's) also provide midterm and final evaluations. Practicum students return to on-campus seminars on three Friday mornings during the 12 weeks of placement(s). After the first few days of placement, students return to campus and present particulars on the school district and school in which they are placed; ensuring that each student has an initial understanding of their school's context, culture and climate.

At the midpoint of the practicum, students return to campus for a seminar where they submit midterm evaluations from the CT's, share a videotape of an early practicum teaching episode, and submit two journal article description and reaction papers in their subject areas. The Instructor collects the videotapes at the end of the seminar, views the videotaped lessons and writes formative evaluations of the taped lessons. The Instructor also provides guidelines for constructing resumes and standards-based units of instruction that are subsequently submitted by the practicum students in the final on-campus seminar at the end of the 12-week placement(s).

Practicum students make arrangements to pick up their first video episodes of their teaching and the formative written evaluations soon after the mid-point seminar. During the final seminar, at the end of the 12 week placement(s), the students present a second videotaped lesson during the seminar from the same videotape containing the first taped episode. They also submit their resume, their standards-based unit of instruction and their emerging INTASC Portfolio containing naturally occurring artifacts resulting from the practicum experience and prior courses. The Instructor again views subsequent videotaped lessons and provides a summative evaluation of the episodes.

Students make arrangements to pick up the videotapes, resumes, unit plans and INTASC portfolios during final examination week. The Instructor directs students to videotape their future, required student teaching video episodes on the same videotape so that all practicum and student teaching video episodes are on the same VHS videotape. Students are further advised to submit their constructed resumes as part of the student teacher application package and to place their unit plans in their INTASC portfolios.

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